Screen Review

Volpone

Presented by the **BBC's *World Theatre*** series. Broadcast June 16, 1959. Produced by Stephen Harrison. Production Design by Reece Pemberton. Adaptation by Donald Wolfit. With Donald Wolfit (Vopone), John Wynyard (Mosca), Erik Chitty (Corbaccio), Esmond Knight (Corvino), Carl Bernard (Voltore), Jane Griffiths (Celia), Bernard Brown (Bonario), John Wentworth (Sir Politick Would-Be), Dennis Edwards (Peregrine), Aubrey Woods (Castrone), John Southworth (Androgyno), Thomas Hard (Peregrine), Philip Holles (Notario), Keith Pyott (1st Magistrate), Robert Webber (2nd Magistrate), Terence Soall (3rd Magistrate).

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The production history of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* can be divided roughly into two periods: before and after Donald Wolfit first assayed the role of the stage's most notorious faker. As Mira Assaf and Richard Dutton note, from 1938 Wolfit dominated the role for some twenty years, "monopoliz[ing] the market for *Volpone* for such a long time that it was inevitably an influence (either positive or negative) on everything that followed for some time" (6). Wolfit's *Volpone* toured the world in a number of different incarnations linked by a strong emphasis on the play's animal imagery, a tendency to farce and a grandstanding, scenery-chewing performance from Wolfit himself "that selfishly eclipsed the other members of the cast," whose roles were often severely cut (Assaf and Dutton 7). The long shadow cast by Wolfit's ownership of the role is still evident in the play's stage histories.

For students of the play's performance history, Wolfit's performance is happily preserved in a 1959 BBC television version, adapted by Wolfit himself and produced by Stephen Harrison. While never released commercially, this complete 92-minute production survives in reasonable condition (the visual quality better than the audio) and offers a fascinating vision of Wolfit's production reimagined for television, combining a theatrical sensibility in its approach to space with a camera design intent on maximising Wolfit's own command of the frame. In this *Volpone*, unlike the more recent Stage on Screen production, which keeps a critical distance from its lead, Volpone extends his charismatic control to the camera, controlling and shaping the viewer's gaze.

Shakespeare Bulletin 33.4: 641–645 © 2015 The Johns Hopkins University Press.

The Michael Macowan production that featured Wolfit's debut as Volpone was notable for being the first to emphasise strongly the animal types figured in the central characters, and Harrison's screen version makes clear even in its opening credits these associations, glossing not only Volpone as "the Fox" but Mosca as "the Fly," Corvino as "the Crow," and so on. These associations are developed subtly throughout the film through costume touches (Volpone's furs, the severe black angles of the carrion's robes) and through the sometimes stylized mannerisms of the actors, such as Wolfit sniffing his gold chain before putting it around his neck. Most notably, Carl Bernard as Voltore holds himself taut during the first trial scene, looming over Celia and Bonario in the dock and jabbing his fingers forward like talons, crowing over his prey as the trial moves towards victory. The subtlety of this approach ensures the production never becomes parodic but rather allows the allegorical nature of the figures to emerge gradually at moments of key interaction.

The Sir Politick subplot is stripped down to its barest bones, Politick and Peregrine only appearing briefly at the beginning of the mountebank sequence while Lady Would-Be is omitted entirely. The disappearance of the subplot places increased focus on Volpone and Mosca's own environment and, by extension, their control of it. As the film begins, John Wynyard's Mosca establishes Volpone's world, opening curtains, unlocking doors, placing robes and chains in place for his master and drawing the curtains of the bed to reveal Volpone in bed. The relationship is intuitive and unspoken, Mosca here a dark-jerkined butler to his luxuriously moustachioed master. While Mosca busies himself establishing the world of the plot, Volpone concentrates on making the bare minimum of movements, allowing Mosca to dress him patiently before moving to his riches. There is rarely an explicit instruction, Mosca knowing in advance what his master needs to wear and pre-empting his plans.

From his first appearance, Volpone remains central to the frame, Mosca often at or even beyond the edges of the screen. Wolfit's performance is aimed forward at all times, giving preference to a full view of the face that makes the most of his half-closed eyes, his jangling earrings, and his perfectly poised locks. When the shot shifts, it is usually to establish an austere profile while Mosca kneels, gazing up at him with a sycophancy exaggerated by Wynyard's narrowed eyes and drawn lips, revealing a row of sharp teeth with a prominent central gap. The cutting back and forth between Mosca's intelligent fawning and Volpone's easy confidence aligns the viewer with Mosca, implying during Volpone's long speeches towards (though rarely directly to) the camera that the viewer's gaze is aligned with that of the off-screen Mosca.

The pair's control of the space is of paramount importance throughout. Only when suitors are imminent does Volpone spring to life, and he takes control of the space of deception himself by closing up the closet of his riches. Costume changes are accompanied by Mosca holding up a mirror while flattering Volpone, and the line between Wolfit and Volpone blurs further as Volpone describes the performance he is about to undertake before segueing seamlessly into it. As the

suitors appear, control of the space switches to Mosca and the film's blocking strategy changes. The bed remains upstage and visible, foregrounding Mosca and the relevant gull while Volpone can be seen in the background, often displaying visible frustration or boredom in between feigning his illness. This strategy works to differentiate Volpone in his own person from Volpone of the gulling, and alludes to the power shifts that later threaten to unbalance the production as Volpone is required to cede his utter control of the frame for a prominent place of visible reaction but little direct agency. This is particularly the case during the final act as Volpone hides behind the drawn curtains of his bed and pokes his head out to watch Mosca dash the suitors' hopes in turn. While the dynamics remain clear, it is fascinating to note that at this point in the plot Mosca and Volpone jointly hold a mirror as they prepare themselves, where previously Mosca held it up for his master; similarly, Mosca's increased dominance of the frame and management of the space means that Volpone's reaction is now at times not visible, destabilising and decentering the title character.

The world established in the opening scenes is defined also by its campness. Wynyard adopts a high-pitched, offhand voice for his sycophancy, while Wolfit's Volpone is softly spoken and fluid in movement, reclining and purring as Mosca skips about the room and Nano and his cronies sing their prancing song. The campness becomes more exaggerated as Mosca tells Volpone of Celia, Mosca leaning in close to Volpone to whisper in his ears, holding a jug ready to pour wine into Volpone's cup (the jug, of course, a visual metaphor for Mosca's influence over Volpone in this moment), while Volpone looks away, his eyebrows rising and his mouth pursing in anticipation. Wynyard's sensuality as he describes Celia's delights is perhaps reminiscent, for fans of British sketch shows, of the "Suits you" tailors of *The Fast Show*, relishing in silky tones an imagined sexuality as he leads Volpone on.

As the only woman in the core cast, Jane Griffiths becomes a central presence following the Mountebank scene as the object of contention for Volpone, Mosca, Bonario, and Corvino. Griffiths gives a dignified, restricted performance defined by the necessary poise her dress and hair impose upon her. This has the effect of softening slightly the violence of Corvino's treatment of her following the street scene, as her still, seated performance, her eyes only half open, forestalls escalation. Esmond Knight takes on responsibility for managing these scenes, leaning in threateningly and pacing around her while restricting his manhandling of her to a form of stage management, ensuring she is put appropriately out of sight when Mosca arrives. Griffiths's delicate performance emphasises the production's conception of her as an object of pursuit, framed centrally while men run around her.

As Celia is introduced into Volpone's chamber, her stillness becomes key to the production's strategy. She is completely passive, requiring Corvino to again take the more active role in manoeuvring her and placing her appropriately. They are kept in the foreground as they talk, taking up the right half of the frame, while behind Mosca can be seen, head tilted forward, smirking; and behind him,

Volpone in bed, watching closely. In shots such as this, the production makes clear the circles of influence and control that are in operation, the characters arranged from left to right in the frame (Volpone – Mosca – Corvino – Celia) according to their understood influence. Then, as Volpone and Celia are left alone, the blocking adjusts yet again. Celia sits in the foreground, bemoaning her position and regretting her husband's work, while Volpone and his bed dominate the background. While Celia talks, Volpone throws off the bedclothes, prepares himself at length and moves slowly and smoothly to a position directly behind her.

Celia's decorum allows for no expression of shock more dramatic than an intake of breath and a hand raised to her chest, but the production's triumph at this point is in framing her as an unaware object of Volpone's attentions, Wolfit continuing to command the frame's action even during her soliloquy. He then co-opts the camera in his plans. As she steps up to move around him, both Volpone and the camera quickly reverse their angle to block the right-hand edge of the frame, and the camera continues to switch and block her movement every time she attempts to move until Volpone spins her back into her seat. As the scene progresses and Volpone pursues his wooing with a guitar, Celia becomes ever more physically passive, enabling him to move her head and swing her around and onto his bed. Thus, even while she pleads for freedom, Volpone is able to lean in towards her and finally force her down on the bed. The camera only breaks its alliance with Volpone in order to snap to a wider shot as Bonario emerges and holds a dagger to Volpone's back, occasioning an extraordinary defensive hiss from the "Fox" as he wheels around to face the rescuer.

I dwell on this scene for its importance in aligning the gaze of the viewer and the controlling presence within the frame, demonstrating Harrison's competency with direction within this theatrically oriented space. The same inventiveness is not seen throughout and, in fact, the pivotal courtroom scenes are quite poorly blocked. Celia and Bonario are intermittently visible in an upstage dock while most time is given to the bickering, senile magistrates barely able to peer over a tottering pile of books. The dominant presence is Voltore in the court scenes, but the cramped space means that the composition is frequently messy and the characters have no room to move, leaving these scenes disappointingly static. While the disguised Volpone manages some impressive puppeteering of Voltore, propping up and prompting the advocate, the camera is unable to capture the subtleties of their interaction.

Perhaps inevitably, then, the film is forced to fall back on theatrical logic as Volpone finally addresses the camera in the final scene, admitting that his plan is falling apart before revealing himself to the court. Yet even at this moment of explicit acknowledgement of the camera's complicity with Volpone, the connection is severed. The camera maintains distance as Volpone walks to the front of the court and grandstands, pointing dramatically to the fallen Mosca. The magistrates are kept at the back of the frame while the camera shows in close-up Mosca's face as judgement is passed, but then Mosca is yanked unceremoniously

out of the frame, allowing the viewer to experience the full force of Volpone's slow opening of his mouth, followed by a howl and a snarl. He claims one final direct address to the camera as he admits, "This is called the mortifying of a fox." Neither Voltore nor Corbaccio are afforded reaction shots to their judgement, and only Corvino is allowed a brief sob. The camera's allegiances are, in fact, revealed to lie with the magistrate who turns to the camera to give the final moral sentence.

In true theatrical tradition, and in keeping with Volpone's dominance throughout, the lights go up for a final shot of Volpone, his hands in chains, delivering the Epilogue straight to the camera and leading the final applause himself as the credits roll. The return of Volpone to the center of the frame is as close as possible to a televisual approximation of the lead actor's reclaiming of audience allegiance in the play's closing moments, though where in the theater Volpone's Epilogue directly takes over the courtroom that has just been his downfall, here the reappearance feels more divorced from the main action of the play, isolating rather than prioritising Wolfit. However, the most important effect remains—this is Wolfit's film as well as Volpone's play, and his applause of his own performance may well be the most important resonating image.

Works Cited

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